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Introduction

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This collection of papers is derived from the nineteenth biannual conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion, held in the 'Kontakt der Kontinenten' in Soesterberg, the Netherlands, from 30 August to 2 September 2012, which was sponsored by the School of Catholic Theology of Tilburg University and the Department of Religious Studies and Theology of Utrecht University. The conference brought together some eighty philosophers of religion and researchers from related disciplines, most of them coming from one of the four founding regions of the ESPR, viz. the English speaking region, the North-European region, the German speaking and the Dutch speaking region. Because of the excellent reputation of these conferences over the years, scholars from Eastern and Southern Europe, and even from some non-European countries also participated, thereby enlivening and broadening the discussions about the conference theme. As usual at ESPR conferences, the 2012 conference theme was so chosen that it lent itself to both analytical and continental approaches and to the conversation between the two. Moreover, the study of 'embodied religion' – for this was the theme – cannot take place in isolation, but needs the input from various other disciplines. This is reflected in the current volume.

The study of religion is often marred by a mentalistic bias. Religion is then interpreted as primarily belonging to the sphere of the spiritual. While it is true that for most religious traditions (Christian as well as non-Christian) God is a spiritual and disembodied being, even the presence of God is always

a mediated presence, and it may well be argued that this mediation is always material in character.[1] It is one-sided to approach religion through the study of convictions, concepts, values and arguments only. Religions are also typically very down to earth, dealing with issues of sexuality, reproduction and family, with practices about food, offering and sacrifice, questions of birth and death etc. Hence the human body is always involved in the concepts and practices of religions. Furthermore religions also express themselves in various material ways, such as in icons and (other) works of art, in prayers, songs and the liturgy, which all have a strong physical component, in the inscription of the religious in the human body (e.g. the sacraments, the ritual of circumcision, and stigmata), and last but not least in a religiously inspired disciplining of the human body. Thus, even spirituality is often embodied.[2]

The idea that religion is something purely spiritual is challenged in a different way as well, namely by recent developments in neuroscience. The findings of neuroscience challenge philosophy of religion to rethink those characteristics of human nature that are vital for religion, such as free will, altruism, morality, and last but not least the human person as a 'self.' Some of the more extreme forms of neuroscience go as far as to suggest that a complete material explanation of human nature is in sight, thus annihilating, together with the spiritual dimension of the human person, the spiritual dimension of religion. In order to have a fruitful discussion between philosophy of religion and neuroscience it is imperative to avoid such a reductionism. But, at the same time, it is clear that neuroscientific research sheds an intriguing light on the question what it means when people call themselves religious.

This gives ample support for the two underlying theses of the contributions to this conference volume. First, that religion is always embodied in various ways: on the level of God's presence in humans, on that of the multitude of ways in which people express their religiosity, and on that of the neurological processes that accompany religious feelings and attitudes. Second, that major changes in the basic anthropological concepts regarding the human body inevitably have an impact upon religion, and thus also challenge philosophy of religion to rethink how religions are embodied in the human person.

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[1] See, e.g., Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2012), 8–9.

[2] See, e.g., Willem Marie Speelman, *God aan den lijve ondervinden: Lichamelijke spiritualiteit volgens Franciscus en Clara* (Leeuwarden: Discovery Books, 2012).

The papers included in this volume highlight the complexity of the conference-theme as well as the variety of philosophical perspectives that are taken in order to understand the phenomenon of embodied religion. They differ in style, method and in their ways to relate to culture and science. To give an example, it was in the wake of the rise of phenomenology and its concept of the 'body as subject' that theological anthropology and (continental) philosophy of religion started to pay systematic attention to the impact of religion on the human body in general and to various shapes of religious embodiment in particular. Similarly, analytic philosophy has always been strong in examining the effects of scientific discoveries on the traditional idea of the human person as a free, morally responsible, spiritual being. One of the goals of the conference was to foster a dialogue between these approaches, resulting in a better view of the promising perspectives, concepts and arguments that philosophy of religion can use in order answer the questions raised by the new developments in our understanding of human nature.

This volume starts with the keynote address by Ola Sigurdson, in which he discusses different perspectives on (religious) embodiment, particularly stemming from (the history of) culture and modern medicine. Sigurdson explains that, because of the current hegemony of medicine (including neuroscience), the personal as well as the social dimension of religious embodiment is lost out of sight. Hence, he stresses the need of a non-reductive approach of religious embodiment, which is exactly what the contributions to this volume, taken together, try to achieve.

In order to structure the great variety of perspectives on embodied religion somewhat of the conference, we divided the general conference theme into four subthemes and asked the main speakers to comment on it. Their contributions to this volume are arranged accordingly. The first subtheme is e*mbodied religion: a philosophical reflection on mystical experiences and religious disciplining.* In all religious traditions there are numerous examples of how religion does not only change the human mind (e.g. through conversion), but also affects the human body directly (e.g. various mystical experiences, including the so-called stigmata as an extreme example) and indirectly (e.g. through the moral and doctrinal teachings of religions, physical disciplining etc.). Can philosophy of religion offer (new) anthropological concepts to understand the corporeal impact of religion? Moreover, do these insights enable philosophy of religion to criticise problematic aspects of religious embodiment? In their papers, Jonna Bornemark and Petruschka Schaafsma comment on these questions. Bornemark takes a Christian mystic text as her point of

departure in order to present a phenomenological analysis of sensibility as the meeting place between the soul and God. Schaafsma treats the same question as Bornemark by turning to the book of Hosea, investigating different motives of embodiment in the text. In particular, she explores the body-related notions of 'dependence' and 'discernment.'

The second subtheme deals with *rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God,* and asks if this takes us *beyond a purely symbolic religion.* In all religions rituals play a crucial role in making the presence of God or the Divine felt by humans. In the (Catholic) theology of the Eucharist the real presence of God is expressed through the doctrine of the transubstantiation. But other sacraments and rituals can also be considered as material expressions of a spiritual reality. Can philosophy of religion make sense of these embodiments of God and does it influence our view of magical practices? In his paper, Mark Wynn starts his answer to these questions by noting some of the ways in which human beings can be attuned in bodily terms to place-relative 'existential meanings.' He then extends this case to the religious domain, by examining the nature of sacred sites and the role of religious concepts in aesthetic experience. In his reply to Wynn, Roderich Barth reconstructs religious experience in the context of a symbol theory that incorporates insights of philosophical anthropology and the contemporary theory of emotion.

The third subtheme focuses on the issue of *neuroscience and free will,* and asks whether *we still can say that we are called to be free.* It is aimed at various ways to rethink free will in light of recent empirical research that seems to imply that decisions are made in the brain before we are aware of them. Do these scientific insights present an adequate understanding of the philosophical concept of the free will, and, if so, can we still say with Paul that we are called to be free (Gal. 5:13)? In his contribution to this subtheme, Marcel Sarot evaluates neuroscientific experiments on free will, especially Benjamin Libet's experiments. He argues that Libet's experiments do not decide the debate between compatibilist and incompatibilist conceptions of free will, nor do they count against the libertarian conception of free will. In his response paper, Aku Visala first argues that the nature of our freedom and what is required for are outside the sciences. He then shows that the positive function of neuroscience in this context is to highlight the fact that some of our actions are driven by causal factors which we have not previously recognised and which we have no control over.

The final subtheme deals with another aspect of the relation between a scientific outlook on the body and its implications for religion. Its title was:

Religion, Morality and Being Human: What about 'Thy will be done'? It is about psychobiological and etiological research, suggesting that certain degrees of moral consciousness and behaviour are found not only among human beings, but also among animals, especially primates. This seems to suggest that morality is not specifically human. If this insight is true, it obviously challenges the idea of human's unique dignity, which is supported by the religious conviction that humans are children of God par excellence. Furthermore, does the religious commandment that humans are called upon to do the will of God then still make sense? In his paper, Dalferth addresses these questions by focusing on the concept of human dignity, a controversial concept in contemporary philosophy and policy. From a Kantian and Christian perspective, 'dignity' is best understood as an orienting term which which calls attention to the humane vs. inhumane way of life to which we commit ourselves when we ascribe dignity to others and ourselves. From a Christian point of view, this humane way of life is a consequence of acknowledging the basic passivity of human life with respect to what is made possible in and for us through the gift of the love of God. In his response, Cottingham argues that the inalienable dignity of all human beings is independent of circumstances, capacities, or qualifications. Kantian autonomy (construed as the rational will, or the ability to exercise it) cannot ground such a notion. The roots of universal human dignity are more plausibly traced to the Judaeo-Christian worldview in which God loves all his children equally, despite their vulnerability and weakness. To mature morally is to come to realize that we gain nothing by insisting on our status, or 'standing on our dignity'; we should recognize instead the dependency we share with all our neighbours.

The final part of this volume consists of a selected number of short-papers that were presented during the conference by junior as well as senior researchers. Besides quality, the main selection criterion was whether the papers connected to one of the four subthemes.